

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 06
Literature and the Sublime

Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on Literary theory. In today's lecture, we are going to move ahead from the word *my missus* which had anchored our earlier discussions on both Plato and Aristotle. And we are going to move towards a new keyword and that word is the sublime. Like *my missus*, this word the sublime has also played a very significant role in the history of English or even Western Literary Theory and the text which is most intimately associated with this new keyword is a work that bears the Greek title *Peri Hypsous*.

Now, in my previous lecture, in fact in all of my previous lectures, I had started by trying to put in historical context authors like Plato and Aristotle as well as their works, which were relevant to our discussion. But today I will only be able to make the most cursory comments about the context that frames the text *Peri Hypsous* because almost nothing is known about the origins of this text that can be stated with any degree of certainty. The text which was originally written in Greek, today exists in a number of editions and the oldest of these editions is found as part of a 10th century manuscript, which is now preserved in the French National Library in Paris which is why it is also often referred to as a Paris edition.

This text kept in Paris exists in a fragmentary form and it has various sections missing, but in spite of these missing bits, it is possible to grasp most of the main arguments as well as the general plan of the work. And if we are looking at the general plan, then we see that the entire text can be divided into three sections really. The text begins by defining *Hypsous* a word to which we will have to return in a moment and then, the text goes on to describe the 5 elements that are necessary to produce this thing that I am calling *Hypsous*. I am using the Greek word right now, but we will see how it translates in a moment and finally, after elaborating on these 5 elements which are necessary for producing *Hypsous*, the text concludes by connecting the discussion on *Hypsous* with a sociopolitical commentary.

So, these are the three broad sections which the text has, and we will be dealing with each of these sections one by one. But before we dwell into the content of the text, let me briefly talk about whatever little is known about the date of this text and its authorship. The 10th century

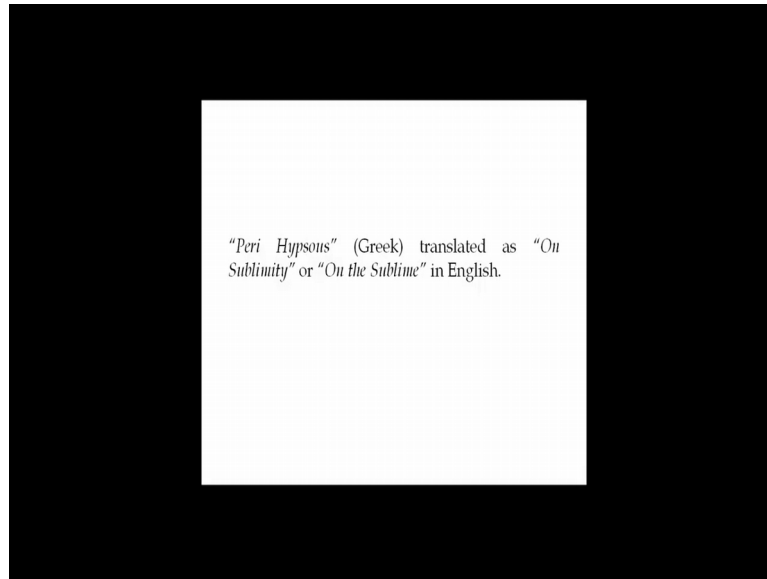
manuscript that we have, mentions the author of the text as Dionysus or Longinus. The most famous Greek author bearing the name Dionysus lived between 6 BC and 7 BC, whereas the most famous classical author bearing the name Longinus lived between 213 and 273 CE Common Era, but there is no definite clue within the text itself, that would allow us to identify this text as authored either by the historical Dionysus, that we know about or with the Historical Longinus.

And the present consensus is that, it was written by a Greek author living in Rome around the 1st century CE, which means that the general consensus is that the text though we do not know definitely who the author was, that text was produced closer to the time of the historical Dionysus than to the time of the historical Longinus. However when the 10th century manuscript containing *Peri Hypsous* was discovered by the Italian humanists Francesco Robertiello, it was assumed that the text has been written by one (Refer Time: 05:20) Longinus. Robertiello had missed out or separating the two names. So, the text actually mentions that it is a work of either Dionysus or Longinus, but this went missing and it was assumed that the text was produced by someone called Dionysus Longinus. And this confusion prevailed even with Nicola Beaulieu, who translated the text in French in 1674 and actually made it very popular within the field of Literary Criticism.

In fact, this mistaken notion about the text authorship was prevalent till almost the 19th century, but since there was no classical author known by the name of Dionysus Longinus, it was assumed till the 19th century, that the text was actually authored by the 3rd century historical figure of Cassius Longinus. Now, however as I told you that the text is no longer attributed to the historical figure of Cassius Longinus, but because it has for so long been associated with the name of Longinus, it is now referred to as being authored by Pseudo Longinus which literally means false or fake Longinus, and this allows us to distinguish the unknown author of this text *Peri Hypsous* from the more well known historical figure.

So, throughout this lecture, I will keep on referring to the author of *Peri Hypsous* as Longinus, but I will ask you to bear in mind that when I refer to the author of this text as Longinus, I am referring to an unknown author Pseudo Longinus and not to the 3rd century Cassius Longinus. Please keep this in mind.

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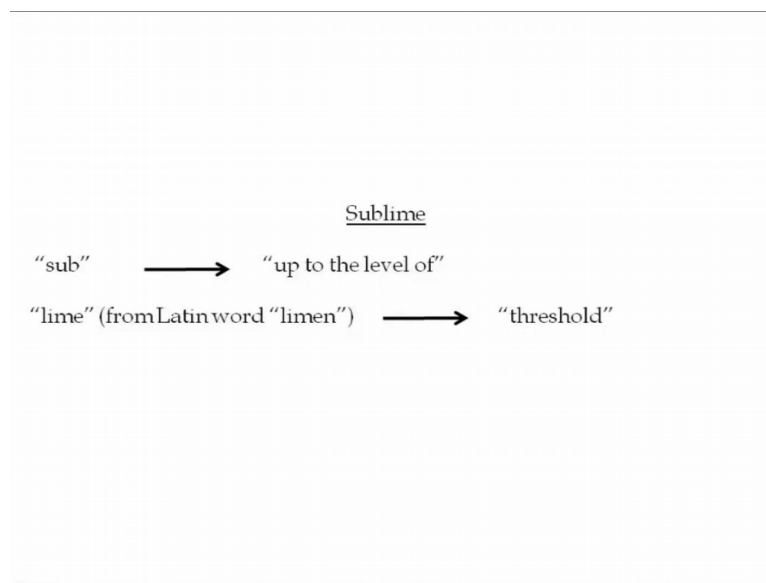


Now, let us come to the title of the text *Peri Hypsous*, which is usually translated in English, as *on Sublimity* or it is also translated as *on the Sublime*. So, the Greek word *Hypsous* is translated as *Sublime*, but the Greek word *Hypsous* literally means something that is high or elevated or lofty, but we encounter a problem when we try to understand the Greek word through English translations like these, English translations like *elevated high* or *lofty* and the reason we encounter a problem is because the word *Hypsous* in Greek is not usually associated with material objects, but rather with non-material things like for instance language or idea or artistic expression. However, English word *elevated* or *lofty* for instance does not have this distinction because we can equally speak of an *elevated language* or a *lofty speech* as an *elevated ceiling* or a *lofty mountain* right.

So, this is why the word *Sublime* is used as a more specific translation of the Greek word *Hypsous* because like *Hypsous* *sublime* too convey the sense of loftiness, but it conveys a sense of loftiness, that is usually associated with non-material things like art, like ideas, like the use of languages for instance.

Now, because we have now arrived at this word *Sublime* and this is our key word in this lecture, let us have a more detailed look at this word.

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If we break down the word Sublime, we first get the prefix sub which literally means up to the level of and the other part of the word sublime that we have is a root word lime which is derived from the Latin word Limen which means threshold and this Latin word Limen has been carried forward in English today in the form of the word Lintel for instance which means the horizontal beam of wood or stone or other such materials that is used on the top of the doorway to support it.

So, the word sublime literally means up to the level of the Lintel, up to the top of the door up to the very top of the door indicating there by a sense of loftiness, but as I said Sublime and lofty are slightly different as far as their usage is concerned because Sublime is more specifically associated to signify the loftiness or the elevated quality of things like art for instance, thoughts, ideas, language expressions. So, just like Hypsous we can talk about the Sublime beauty of words, Poems or Monalisa's smile or of Bhimsen Joshi's singing, but we will not use Sublime to signify merely the elevation of a platform for instance or a multi storied building or a mountain even.

But how does this idea of Hypsous which is translated through the word sublime related specifically to the theorization and understanding of literature. This is now what will concern us and to know this let us move from the dictionary meanings of sublime and try and see how the text by Pseudo Longinus actually elaborates this crucial idea.

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“The *sublime*, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language, and it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown.”

(Chapter I, *On the Sublime*)

The first chapter of the text tells us and I quote the sublime wherever it occurs consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language and it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown.

These lines which identify the sublime as a special quality of a language as it is used by great poets and writers is immediately followed in Pseudo Longinesis text by lines which locate sublimity in the effect that certain kinds of literature produces in their audience and I quote again from the text.

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“The effect of lofty language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport.”

(Chapter I, *On the Sublime*)

The effect of lofty language upon an audience is not persuasion, but transport. In other words, sublimity of a text language is realized only when it produces a particular effect upon the audience. This effect is described in the quoted line as the effect of transport. It is therefore different from say the rhyme sequence that underlines the language of poetry.

The language of a Shakespearean Sonnet like let us see, shall I compare these to a Summer's day will always have the same rhyme scheme a b a b c d c d e f e f g g and it will have the same rhyme scheme irrespective of whether the reader actually recognizes that rhyme scheme or not, however the language of that sonnet can only be identified as sublime as and when it produces the effect of transportation on the reader.

The sublime therefore at least as far as literary studies is concerned is found associated both with the text and with the reader. So, it is a quality that adheres to the text yes, but it is also something that needs to be activated by the reader and in fact, as I would show later the author also plays an important role in creating the sense of literary sublime. So, the sublime as far as Pseudo Longinus is concerned is to be understood as a triangular relationship between text, author and the reader or audience.

So, let us try to unfold this relationship. This triangular relationship that I have just talked about by going back to that important line, the effect of lofty language upon an audience is not persuasion, but transport.

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"Ekstasis" → "transport", or as the effect of "taking the reader out of himself"

Now, the key word in this line is transport and the Greek original which it represents is the word ecstasies. Now ecstasies has been variously translated in English and apart from the word transport, we also find other translations like for instance taking the reader out of himself. So, the word ecstasies has also been represented as something which takes the reader out of himself, but its most simple translation is perhaps to be found in the word ecstasy. So, what does Psuedo Longinus mean by saying that the sublime produces the effect of ecstasy within the audience. If you look at the text, you will find an answer to this question in the form of a metaphor and again I quote from the text.

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“Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer. [...] Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude.”

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So, ecstasy the feeling produced by the sublime is to be understood as an overwhelming sensation. When the reader encounters the sublime, he is stunned and even ravished as if by a thunderbolt and he loses his normal sense of equilibrium. It is precisely this sense of being mightily overwhelmed that some of the translators have tried to capture by rendering ecstasies as a sense of being transported or as a feeling of being taken out of oneself.

Here, in order to understand the use of the word ecstasies or ecstasy or transport more fully, we will also have to pay attention to how it has been contrasted with the idea of persuasion.

Now, persuasion usually happens if I convince you through logical arguments that would appeal to your rational faculties. So, what does Longinus mean then when he says that sublimity or the sublime in literature produces ecstasy that hits us with an irresistible force which is quite unlike persuasion because persuasion we can control; ecstasy is beyond our rational control.

Well, one way of interpreting this would be to conceive ecstasy and persuasion. As binary opposites, persuasion is then associated with reason with logic and by contrast the sense of ecstasy that the sublime creates is associated with irrationality and with a kind of a mad frenzy passion. Now, if you are approaching Longinus's text after having read Plato's *The Republic*, this kind of analysis will evidently seem to be very appealing because according to Longinus sublime is an integral aspect of good poetry in particular and good art in general which means that poetry and here, I am using poetry in the broadest sense of the term would produce ecstasy rather than persuasion. This will fold neatly with Plato's argument that poetry appeals to the irrational faculties of human nature and therefore, undermines rational faculties.

As you will remember from our earliest lectures, this was one of the main reasons why Plato wanted to banish poets from his ideal republic. So, here if we read Longinus from this perspective, we can very well construct an argument where Longinus would seem to support Plato's assessment of poetry as evoking a mad frenzy of emotions, however if the passage that I quoted from chapter 1 of *On the Sublime* which spells out this distinction between persuasion and ecstasy is compared with what Longinus proposes in chapter 7, then the interpretation of sublime ecstasy as a state of irrational frenzy seems to be undermined.

It is no longer sustainable if we read chapter 1 and chapter 7 together because in chapter 7, Longinus argues that one of the marks of true sublimity in literature is that it and I quote dispossess the soul to high thoughts and leave in the mind more food for reflection than the words seem to convey. So, the feeling of ecstasy that is evoked by the true sublime does not simply produce a state of mad frenzy, but rather elevates the human mind and guides it to higher thoughts and reflections.

So, ecstasy produced by the true sublime rather than leading to frivolous irrationality actually ultimately leads to a state of deeper intellectual contemplation and a good example to understand. This would be chapter 11 of *Bhagavad Gita* for instance because till chapter 10 of

Gita, we have a dialogue between Krishna and Arjun, where the former which is Krishna tries to convince the latter Arjun to fight the battle of Mabharata by using various arguments that might appeal to the reasoning faculty of Arjun, but in chapter 11 Krishna gives Arjun, a glimpse of what is usually known as his [FL] or cosmic self which overwhelms Arjun and produces a sense of ecstasy.

Indeed verses 10 to 13 of chapter 11 of Gita presents this sublime vision that Arjun has through a kind of poetic language which is meant to produce an equivalent sublime experience for every reader. So, every time you read those verses, it is as if you are reliving the sublime experience that Arjun had on the battlefield and the result of all this is not logical persuasion, but it is ecstasy, it is a sense of transportation which the reader like Arjun feels and the reader finds himself almost taken out of himself, but this ecstasy does not lead to a state of irrational frenzy neither does it cause a rational frenzy in Arjun nor does it cause irrational frenzy in the reader.

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Stephen Halliwell
(1953 -)



Source: <https://st-andrews.academia.edu/StephenHalliwell>

Rather it leads to what Stephen Halliwell calls in his analysis of Longinus texts as an surplus of meaning and this surplus of meaning produced through ecstasy discloses to the reader deeper layers of reality that is otherwise not available through the exercise of mundane logic.

Now, from this discussion of ecstasy, let us move to the discussion of the elements that are identified by Longinus as necessary to create the sense of sublime in literature. According to Longinus 5 elements are key to the creation of a sublime style and these 5 elements are

divided by him in two broad categories. Elements are categorized either as natural or they are categorized as products of art or skill.

So, the natural category which is the 1st category includes 2 elements, the 1st of which is described as the ability to conceive great or elevated thoughts. This is the 1st element in the natural category and there is also another element which is also natural, and this is the a vocation of strong emotions. So, these are the two elements in the natural category.

The category related to art or skill in turn involves 3 elements. The 1st one is figures of thought and speech, the 2nd element deals with elevated diction or elevated choice of words and the 3rd deals with the noble arrangement of these elevated words. Now, though Longinus mentions these 5 elements that are necessary for the sublime style, he also holds that the first two elements which are described as natural are more important than the set of elements which are dependent on skills, indeed Longinus believes that it is only when the natural elements are present that the true sub lime is produced.

So, a literary work might be produced with great technical skills, but as far as Longinus is concerned, without elevated thoughts or without strong emotions in forming that work, it will never attain the heights of sublimity. Thus, since the main source of the sublime style is identified in this text as the two natural elements, let us have a closer look at each of them one by one. The first of these elements that is great or elevated thought is identified as a most important requirement for a sublime style.

According to Longinus elevated thought is first and foremost the product of a great and noble mind. So, in order to think about elevated ideas, you will have to first have a noble mind and in chapter 9, we find that this greatness of mind, this nobility of mind is presented by Longinus as a natural endowment something that naturally occurs to some people which means that some people are born with a noble mind and therefore, they are born with a capacity to conceive elevated thoughts, but this idea of a natural genius, a person born naturally with a noble mind is at the same time coupled with an argument that says that even if someone is born with a great mind, he needs to develop it and regularly push it towards the direction of greatness, so that it becomes filled with elevated thoughts.

So, clearly greatness can also be cultivated and is not entirely limited to natural endowment. This notion of cultivation is also evident in the idea of imitation or emulation that Longinus talks about. He argues that elevated thoughts can be generated by emulating other writers

whose works are known for the sublimity and the intention here is not to merely copy them. Here we are not dealing with the kind of ideas that we were talking about when we were discussing the term mimesis rather the intention is to seek inspiration from these earlier works and maybe even to finally surpass them.

So, apart from greatness of mind and emulation of great works, Longinus also talks about a third characteristic that helps to create elevated thought and he describes this third quality, third characteristic as *fantasia*. Now, this Greek word *Fantasia* is usually translated as imagination, but I think it is more helpful if we try and understand *Fantasia* as an ability to visualize something in great details and present to the reader ideas or thoughts in the form of vivid images. So, these are the three things; noble mind, emulation and imagination of visualization that results in the production of great or elevated thoughts which was the first element in the natural category that we had discussed.

So, now let us move on to the second of the 5 elements, which Longinus identifies as important for the production of the sublime and according to the text, this vital aspect of the sublime style is its ability to arouse strong emotions, its ability to evoke strong emotions and this is not difficult to understand especially after our discussion of ecstasy because the reason why ecstasy overwhelms us is precisely because it is associated with the arousal of strong and even vehement emotions. Thus, for instance the verses of 10 to 13 of chapter 11 in Bhagavad Gita which both records and reproduces for the readers the sublime experience of Arjun is followed in verse 14 by a description of Arjun, who is taken out of himself by the effect of emotions which are so strong and so vehement that they are almost of violence that is done to him.

So, the effect of the sublime beauty of the cosmic form of Lord Krishna is to produce a sense of vehemence of emotion which almost comes across as a violation of Arjun. Finally, after having discussed these elements, I would like to comment on the last chapter of Longinus of the sublime because as I have said that long genesis theory of sublime presents a complex triangulation of the reader, the author and the text, but the last chapter of on the sublime adds another layer of complexity because it connects this triangular relationship between the reader, the text and the author with a sociopolitical commentary.

This last chapter begins by quoting the argument of a certain philosopher which points out that the sense of the sublime is apparently missing in the contemporary social milieu to which

both the philosopher and Longinus belongs to the putative reason for this absence of the sublime is not the lack of literary skills or the use of charming language, but rather the absence is supposedly caused by the lack of coat and coat transcendent natures.

Now, this statement neatly dovetails with the relative importance that Longinus ascribes to the natural elements of the sublime style over the technical elements or the elements related to skill because this means that the reason for which sublime is found to be missing in Longinus is contemporary society is primarily because the people around him are no longer able to conceive elevated thoughts which might produce ecstasy.

They do not have the transcendent nature to produce elevated thoughts which are crucial to the sublime style, but why is there a lack of people with transcendent nature with noble minds who can think of elevated thoughts. Well, Longinus first looks at the argument that is given by the philosopher because philosopher booth makes this statement and also, gives a reason as to why this kind of situation was prevalent during his time. His argument is that transcendent natures are no longer abundant in the contemporary society, because first century Rome was no longer a democracy.

In other words, the ability to transcend the mundane, which is the essence of the sublime can only flourish in a political setup which encourages individual freedom and I quote this is what the philosopher thinks freedom has power to feed the imaginations of the lofty minded and inspire hope this individual freedom according to the philosopher is ensured by democracy.

Now, those of you who are familiar with ancient Roman history will know that room was a republic till 27 BC and after that it transited to a form of Monarchical Government. There is a social milieu that the philosopher is talking about is a result of this political transition that had in the not too distant past and he is connecting this transition, this socio political transition with the absence of transcendent niche in the society around him, however as far as Longinus is concerned, the connection between democracy and the sub line is not quite sustainable, because according to Longinus, it is just out of nostalgia for the lost democratic order of the Roman Republic that the philosopher is trying to connect the flourishing of the transcendent nature with the democratic political setup. It is just nostalgia.

There is not much truth to it for Longinus, rather than democracy or the absence of democracy being the reason. The real reason for the loss of transcendent natures that can

produce the sublime is the widespread social tendency towards Avarice. So, according to Longinus it is not democracy rather it is the widespread social tendency towards avarice that is causing the lack of transcendent nature and therefore, the lack of sublime.

For Longinus, avarice or the desire to accumulate boundless wealth makes one to heavily engaged with ones mundane mortal existence. In such a case, greatness is sought not to transcendence or the desire for immortal fame, but rather through an extravagant lifestyle Longinus, therefore opens that its better to live in a political milieu which does not encourage individual freedom because that freedom invariably leads to the pursuit of avarice and all the other concomitant evils and I quote from Longinus.

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Longinus argues, "it is perhaps better for men like ourselves to be ruled than to be free, since our appetites, if let loose without restraint upon our neighbours like beasts from a cage, would set the world on fire with deeds of evil."

(Chapter XLIV, *On the Sublime*)

It is perhaps better for men like ourselves to be ruled than to be free, since our appetites if we let lose without restraint upon our neighbours like beasts from a cage would set the world on fire with deeds of evil.

These differing opinions regarding the connection between the sublime and the political milieu that we encounter in the last chapter of Longinuses text is rather interesting. Primarily because for us reading this text, we are clearly located in a different juncture of history where most of the world, the norm is to have democracy rather than to have other kinds of government. So, I would therefore encourage you to deliberate on your own and see if you agree more with the philosopher and the connection that he makes between sublime and the

production of individual freedom and the political setup of democracy or whether you agree with Longinus more.

So, I will leave it open-ended for you to decide. In our future lectures we will see how this theorization of sublime resonates with the way literature and literature criticism was redefined by the romantic movement during the late 18th and early 19th century. But before that we will be seeing how the category of literature, the modern category of literature and indeed English literary studies as we understand it now gradually emerged during the 18th century.

So, in our next lecture we will take up briefly the things that were happening in the field of literary studies in England during the 18th century and then, we will move towards the Romantic Movement.

Thank you.